



January 2, 2017

## What Should We Do?

On New Years' Eve morning I was participating in a well-attended meeting held by Congressman Danny K. Davis entitled, "How do we reduce or stop violence in the community?" when people's phones and social media accounts started to buzz. There was another shooting, and someone else had died in the Austin community as we were meeting. Who was it? Where was it? As the story evolved, the person was shot and killed just outside of my District representative office at Chicago Avenue and Cicero Avenue, also known as Mandela Road. People were texting me pictures of the crime scene with police directing traffic on busy Cicero Avenue, with red police crime scene tape wrapped around the light poles and around the statue of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in front of the Westside Health Authority building where I have my office.

What does it mean when someone is shot and killed – the 762<sup>nd</sup> homicide of the year in Chicago – when it happens in broad daylight at the intersection of Chicago Avenue and Mandela Road? What can we think when this last reported homicide of 2016 happens just steps from a statue of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. portrayed as an African chieftain and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize? What does it mean when there is police crime scene tape wrapped around the statue of Dr. King? What would be Dr. King's response, whose birthday we will commemorate in just a few days? What would Nelson Mandela say, for whom we renamed Cicero Avenue as Mandela Road, when his road was the place this 24 year old man took their last breath?

Media reports indicate that the shooting occurred during an argument after a motor vehicle accident.

That same afternoon when I was driving in Austin, I came across more red police tape where someone else had been shot at Lake and Corcoran, just south of the Central Green Line stop. I have been asked, "Why has the murder rate gone up so much in 2016?" Our communities have been struggling a long time with a lack of opportunities in education and employment, a lack of access to social services, and continuing racism, so if these and other root-cause social determinants are largely unchanged, what has caused the spike this year?

There is usually a warning that you have a hole in the roof of your house – there is a small buckling of the paint or the plaster, and maybe a small drip. But, over time, if you don't pay attention to the warning signs and if you don't do something about it, pretty soon the whole roof will cave in, and you will have a flood in your house. So it is this year.

There is always talk about the breakdown of families in black communities. Unemployment is higher resources are fewer on the West Side compared with other communities in Chicago. If you add up the combined financial distress of so many families on the West Side, your equation gets a level of community stress that carries an intensified response to tense situations. If financial problems can destroy a family, there should be no surprise that the West Side not only has a breakdown of families but a breakdown of communities. Research shows that when you have a vibrant community with resources and low unemployment, stress is reduced. The level of long-term financial stress endured by West Side residents may be a big contributor for the reason for the response of extreme life-ending violence that we have seen.

We also can't forget about the closed mental health clinics closed leaving family little help to cope. It is easy to talk about building stronger families and making parents accountable, but ask yourself: how can a family under pressure create accountability if they don't know how they can pay rent, utilities, and feed their family as a result of economic, criminal, and educational injustices? We have real proof that communities that are treated fairly have less community stress and less crime.

Why else are so many people taking justice into their own hands and using guns to create their own justice? Have people lost faith in the action of our police, court system and criminal justice system? How can we re-establish faith and confidence in systems of justice - of restorative justice - so victims and perpetrators can be made whole and true justice be served? How can we have faith and hope in our fellow community members, learning from each other, looking for the best in each other, and assuming the best and not the worst? What are the best ways to fight racism and improve opportunities for all? How can we honor and respect people like Dr. King and President Mandela by living our best lives in the short time we have here on earth?

Many suggestions have been put forward, including finding jobs for young Chicagoans as suggested by Arne Duncan with the Emerson Collective; providing real public and private investment in our poorer communities; creating a strong business district to create jobs and reduce crime in Austin as articulated by Malcolm Crawford; creating jobs by eliminating vacant and abandoned properties – a win-win- as promoted by Mark Carter of 1 Chicago; providing the necessary tools, resources, and support to make the corridor along Chicago Avenue safe, improving economic strength, and establishing a cultural identity through AV72, an approved Special Service Area led by Morris Reed at Westside Health Authority; refunding CeaseFire Illinois violence-reduction program also known as Cure Violence as recently suggested by columnist Clarence Page; teaching peace through mentoring; strengthening mental health care, especially for families under the most stress; holding our police accountable for true community engagement, professional conduct and solving crimes, with the immediate establishment of a Citizen Oversight Board for the Chicago Police Department; holding the criminal justice apparatus accountable for the illegal trafficking of guns into our communities; encouraging, developing and using best practices generated by robustly funded research into injury and gun violence; and, finally, perhaps most importantly, developing a comprehensive plan with a timetable, measurable accomplishments, and designating who is responsible - - being scattered without clear goals leads to lack of accomplishment.

There are more questions than answers, but we can find a way forward as we pray for wisdom, peace and progress in 2017. As a Board Member of West Suburban Medical Center, we will be hosting a stakeholders meeting with businesses, not-for-profits, health centers, and state agencies to help to put together a locally-oriented and comprehensive community plan against violence. The meeting will be the first week of February 2017.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Ford', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford  
State Representative-Eighth District